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Fiction and trauma from the Second World War to 9/11

Citation for published version:

Crosthwaite, P 2016, Fiction and trauma from the Second World War to 9/11. in P Boxall & B Cheyette (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*. vol. 7, Oxford University Press, Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198749394.001.0001>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1093/oso/9780198749394.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198749394.001.0001)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

The Oxford History of the Novel in English

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Crosthwaite, P. (2015). Fiction and Trauma from the Second World War to 9/11. In P. Boxall, & B. Cheyette (Eds.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*. (Vol. 7). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This is a draft of a chapter that has been accepted for publication by Oxford University Press in the forthcoming book *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*. (Vol. 7). edited by Boxall, & B. Cheyette due for publication in 2015.

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Fiction and Trauma from the Second World War to 9/11
Paul Crosthwaite

At the end of Pat Barker's novel *Another World* (1998), the protagonist reflects on the desolate dying words uttered by his grandfather, Geordie, whose final months have been blighted by the return, after decades in abeyance, of horrific memories of his experiences during the First World War:

‘I am in hell’. Present tense, the tense in which his memories of the war went on happening. A recognized symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, a term Geordie probably never knew. Though he knew the symptoms well enough, he knew what it did to the perception of time. The present – remote, unreal; the past, in memory, nightmare, hallucination, re-enactment become the present. I *am* in hell [...]

Suppose time can slow down. Suppose it's not an ever rolling stream, but something more viscous and unpredictable, like blood. Suppose it coagulates around terrible events, clots over them, stops the flow. Suppose Geordie experienced time differently because, for him, time was different? (Barker 1999, 270-71; emphasis in original)

This passage expressly articulates suppositions that underlie many of the prominent British novels of recent decades concerned with themes of history, memory, violence, and loss: that a particularly devastating experience may come to define an individual's very being and identity; that such an experience has the capacity to remain perpetually, overwhelmingly present; that the very fabric of time is subject to warps and distortions; and that this baleful condition is best defined in terms of psychological trauma.

While Barker's specific points of reference in *Another World* are the trenches of the Great War, this wider understanding of history as trauma in recent British fiction is part of a melancholy and pessimistic cultural and intellectual sensibility spawned by the disasters of World War II. Barker herself notes how, in her own imagination, the horrors of the First World War are refracted through those of the Second: ‘The Somme is like the Holocaust. It revealed things about mankind that we cannot come to terms with and cannot forget. It never becomes the past’ (qtd. in Jaggi 2003). Barker, like the other contemporary British novelists discussed in this chapter, reflects in her fiction on how the spasms of catastrophic violence that punctuated the twentieth century, and continue to define the twenty-first, not only traumatized individuals on a mass scale, but also dealt irrevocable damage to foundational assumptions concerning reason, progress, meaning, and language.

Such weighty preoccupations, however, took some time to fully coalesce in the fiction of the post-Second World War period. There were few substantial treatments of the war in its immediate aftermath, and when such responses began to appear in the 1950s, and swelled in number in the 1960s, they did so predominantly in the form of conventional social realist narratives concerned with the immediate experience of combat and the impact of the conflict on the structures of British society (see Stevenson 2004, 397-400, 414-16). Critical and popular successes of this kind included Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952-61), C.P. Snow's *The New Men* (1954) and *Homecomings* (1956) (instalments in the *Strangers and Brothers* series), and Anthony Powell's *The Military Philosophers* (1968) (from the novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time*). Other novels, such as Richard Hughes' *The*

Fox in the Attic (1961), Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), and Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), were more receptive to the profound philosophical questions posed by the war, but it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that such questions became the sustained focus of major works of British fiction.

Particularly important contributions to the literary reckoning with the war were made in this period by George Steiner and D.M. Thomas. Steiner's reflections on the conflict – which took both literary and philosophical forms – were shaped by his own harrowing wartime experiences, his Jewish family having left Paris in 1940 to settle in New York, before Steiner relocated to pursue his studies in England, a country with which he retained strong links throughout his career (via a fellowship at Cambridge), even during two decades spent teaching in Geneva. The war – and in particular the Holocaust – have been abiding preoccupations in Steiner's work (see Cheyette 1999), but this preoccupation is riven by paradox, for, as he explains in an essay from the 1980s, a central tenet of his philosophy (one widely asserted today with respect to traumatic events in general) is that "[i]t is by no means clear that there can be or that there ought to be, any form, style, or code of articulate, intelligible expression somehow adequate to the facts of the Shoah' (Steiner 1988, 155). Steiner's writing, then, is compelled to respond to historical events that, in his view, cannot, and should not, be claimed by language. He confronts this paradox in several works of fiction, including the story 'The Deepes of the Sea' (1956) and the pieces in the collection *Anno Domini* (1964), but his most famous – and controversial – fictional meditation on the Holocaust is the novella *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, first published in the *Kenyon Review* in 1979 and, with minor revisions, as a book in 1981. In the novella, Adolf Hitler, alive after faking his death in the bunker and surviving for decades deep in the Amazonian jungle, is tracked down by Israeli forces intent on placing him on trial in Jerusalem. After the mastermind of the operation, a Holocaust survivor named Emmanuel Lieber, loses contact with the search party, his disembodied voice drifts across the airwaves, cataloguing, in snatched, truncated fragments, a scattering of the numberless atrocity's perpetrated at Hitler's behest, before lamenting:

we can imagine the cry of one, the hunger of two, the burning of ten, but past a hundred there is no clear imagining; he [Hitler] understood that, take a million and belief will not follow nor the mind contain, and if each and every one of us [...] were to rise before morning and speak out ten names that day, ten from the ninety-six thousand graven on the wall in Prague, ten from the thirty-one thousand in the crypt at Rome, ten from those at Matthaussen Drancy Birkenau Buchenwald Theresienstadt or Babi-Yar, ten out of six million, we should never finish the task[.] (Steiner 1981, 36-37)

Hitler's malevolent genius, Lieber suggests, was to recognize that, reproduced on a sufficiently massive scale, murder would enter a realm of sublime abstraction where human comprehension would itself be overwhelmed. More provocatively still, rather than 'simply contrasting' Lieber and Hitler, the narrative portrays them instead 'as part of the same dialectic' (Cheyette 1999, 76): both exude an aura of unearthly insight (their eyes are said to be illumined with, respectively, a 'secret light' and a 'strange light' [13, 34]) and their positions with regard to the text's overarching theme – the power of language – are intimately related, for while Lieber despairs of finding a mode of expression adequate to the obscenity of the Holocaust, it was Hitler's

diabolical eloquence, his mastery of the 'grammar of hell' (33), which, we are to understand, was able to exhort such obscenity into being.

In many ways, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* finds its companion piece in D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, published in 1981, the same year as the appearance of Steiner's novella in book form. Together, the two texts epitomise the problematics of language and representation that preoccupy the other writers discussed in this chapter. Appearing in quick succession at the turn of the 1980s, they anticipated much that was to come in British fiction over the following decades. Like Steiner's novella, however, Thomas' novel was a fictional response to the Holocaust that proved to and be as controversial as it was celebrated. Critics charged Thomas, who possessed no personal familial or ethnoreligious connection to the Holocaust, with opportunistically appropriating the events for his own aesthetic purposes, with plagiarizing a survivor's account of the massacre of Jews at the Babi Yar ravine in Kiev in September 1941, and with veering into pornography in his exploration of a victim's erotic inner life. Thomas responded to the first two accusations by explaining that his decision to incorporate extracts (duly acknowledged but for some critics unduly extensive) from the testimony transcribed in Anatoly Kuznetsov's 'documentary novel' *Babi Yar* (1966) answered to ethical and aesthetic demands. It would, he suggested, 'have seemed immoral had I, a comfortable Briton, fictionalised the holocaust' (Thomas 1989, 47); likewise, 'imagination [...] is exhausted in the effort to take in the unimaginable which happened' (qtd. in Young 1988, 55). Though the eye-witness account of the survivor, Dina Pronicheva, offered, for Thomas, the only means of access to an event beyond the scope of novelistic imagining, his narrative acknowledges that, as Steve Vine puts it, 'the enormity of the suffering at Babi Yar' (where over 33,000 Jews were murdered in two days) 'exceeds all telling, including Pronicheva's, Kuznetsov's, and Thomas's' (Vine 2010, 209). Like Steiner, Thomas recognized that the effect of the sheer staggering magnitude of the Nazi genocide was to erase the singularity of individual victims, merging them into undifferentiated masses of bodies and of statistics – an effect that no act of historical recovery could possibly overcome:

The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences, even the babes in arms (perhaps especially the babes in arms) [...] If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person.

And this was only the first day. (Thomas 1981, 220)

The claim that Thomas' narrative lapses tastelessly and exploitatively into pornography relates to its status as, amongst other things, a fictionalized Freudian case history orientated around the lurid erotic fantasies of the protagonist, Lisa Erdman, who enters analysis with Freud in Vienna in 1919, complaining of unexplained pains in her breast and abdomen. In accordance with the drift of much of the historical Freud's early psychoanalytic work, Thomas' fictionalised Freud interprets Lisa's psychosomatic symptoms and vivid fantasies – at once sexually explicit and laden with images of apocalyptic violence – as manifestations of sexual hysteria originating in her strained relationship with her father. However, taking its inspiration from the phase of Freud's writing that began with *Beyond the Pleasure* (1920), with its emphasis on the capacity of wartime violence to engender acute

traumatic symptoms, *The White Hotel* ultimately reveals the origins of Lisa's condition to lie not in the infantile, sexual traumas of the past but in the historical traumas of the future, a future that will find her engulfed by the carnage of Babi Yar, the scenes of slaughter materializing the violent imagery of her fantasies, her body bayoneted at the very the sites that troubled her decades before. Vine observes that Thomas 'preserves from Freud the traumatic etiology of hysteria, [...] but understands that trauma as a condition of history' (Vine 2010, 205). By construing history, and especially the mass atrocities of twentieth-century history, specifically in terms of psychological theories of trauma, Thomas, as we will see, proved to be peculiarly prescient with respect to important currents in the fictional and critical writing of the last three decades.

If *The White Hotel*, and other important novels that appeared after it, drew on the discourse of trauma in their representations of extreme wartime experience, fiction by authors who had witnessed combat in the Second World War at first hand often gave expression to the very psychic and temporal logic of trauma itself. Apparent in the writing of authors such as William Golding (who served as an officer in the Royal Navy) and Brian Aldiss (who saw action with the Royal Signals in Burma), this dynamic was especially evident in the work of J.G. Ballard, a writer whose visionary imagination, like those of these two contemporaries, led him to occupy a space overlapping mainstream 'literary' fiction and science fiction. Ballard's formative years were defined by his wartime confinement in a Japanese civilian internment camp on the outskirts of Shanghai. The influence of this period is abundantly clear in the novels (including *The Drowned World* [1962], *The Atrocity Exhibition* [1970], *Crash* [1973], and *High Rise* [1975]) and short stories (such as 'The Voices of Time' [1960], 'The Terminal Beach' [1964], 'The Killing Ground' [1969], and 'The Dead Time' [1977]) which Ballard published during the 1960s and '70s. Indeed, so insistent was Ballard's inscription of images he had internalised in war-torn Shanghai – abandoned apartment blocks, drained swimming pools, water-logged landscapes, corpse-strewn battlefields – that his texts from this period manifest what Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, identified as a compulsion to repeat traumatic scenes not fully assimilated as they occurred (see Crosthwaite 2009, 83-104). The semi-autobiographical *Empire of the Sun* (1984) was Ballard's first overt and extended fictional engagement with his wartime life in Shanghai, and won him a much enlarged readership. The novel testifies powerfully to the traumatic impact of his experiences, depicting scenes of wreckage and horror with hallucinatory vividness, as when the protagonist, Jim, visits a battlefield littered with the bodies of dead Chinese soldiers:

They lined the verges of the roads and floated in the canals, jammed together around the pillars of the bridges. In the trenches between the burial mounds hundreds of dead soldiers sat side by side with their heads against the torn earth, as if they had fallen asleep together in a deep dream of war. (Ballard 1994a, 32)

Even as it captured the traumatic force of such childhood encounters, however, the novel enacted a process of 'working through', reassembling the intensely cathected image-fragments that had peppered the earlier work into a coherent historical narrative. The sequel to *Empire of the Sun*, *The Kindness of Women* (1991), took this process several steps further, integrating the war years into the (partly fictionalised) story of the life as a whole and overtly dramatizing a thematic of psychic recovery – from war, but also from the loss of a spouse and the excesses of the '60s

counterculture – such that, by the end of the novel, Jim can reflect that ‘[t]he time of desperate stratagems was over, the car crashes and hallucinogens, the deviant sex ransacked like a library of extreme metaphors. Miriam [Jim’s dead wife] and all the murdered dead of a world war had made their peace’ (Ballard 1994b, 347; see Crosthwaite 2009, 105-13). If, then, trauma was the very condition of production of Ballard’s early fiction, by the latter part of his career trauma had been processed into a theme – a theme, moreover, which allowed for the possibility of some respite from the grip of the ‘repetition compulsion’.

In Ballard’s ‘catastrophe’ novels of the 1960s and ‘concrete and steel’ narratives of the 1970s, ominous images derived from the ravaged landscapes of World War II-era Shanghai were invariably implicated in actual or impending disasters still more cataclysmic than the war itself. This apocalyptic sensibility was shared by many other late twentieth-century British novelists. Amongst the most notable were Russell Hoban and Maggie Gee, whose key texts distinguished themselves by their exacting engagement with the challenge of imagining ‘the end’ – and its paradoxical aftermath. Amidst a large and eclectic oeuvre, *Riddley Walker* (1980) remains the novel on which the reputation of the US-born, London-based Hoban rests. Set in Kent two millennia after a nuclear holocaust has returned human civilization to a prehistoric condition, the novel is narrated by the eponymous protagonist in a degraded, phonetically rendered version of modern-day Kentish dialect. As David Cowart observes, in this future world ‘spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary’ – the very constituent elements of language – ‘seem to have suffered a kind of radiation sickness’ (Cowart 1989, 88). The narrative concerns attempts to discover the true nature of the ‘1 Big 1’, the conflagration that, as folk memory has it, harnessed the power of ‘the Littl Shynin Man the Addom’ to lay waste to the world, ushering in the ‘Bad Time’. So vividly realised was the historical and linguistic world of *Riddley Walker* that when, two decades later, the British novelist David Mitchell set about imagining a ragged community struggling to keep alive the ‘Civ’lise’ of the ‘Old’uns’ in the wake of some cataclysmic ‘Fall’, he found a ready-made model for his narrative – one of the multiple elements of the kaleidoscopic *Cloud Atlas* (2004) – in Hoban’s novel (see Mitchell 2005). In *Riddley Walker*, the mysterious conditions that define the horizons of the protagonist’s existence entrench his inarticulacy by proving, themselves, to be inarticulable, such that a blank page seems somehow more expressive of their ineffable power than one inscribed with text:

I dont have nothing only words to put down on paper. Its so hard. Some times theres mor in the emty paper nor there is when you get the writing down on it. You try to word the big things and they tern ther backs on you. (Hoban 1998, 161)

A similar acknowledgement of the inadequacy of language in the face of global catastrophe (one also registered by George Steiner and D.M. Thomas with respect to the Holocaust) is found in the work of Maggie Gee. Gee has imagined the end of the world by water (*The Flood* [2004]) and by ice (*The Ice People* [1998]) but, as for Hoban, it is the prospect of planetary death by fire – or, more specifically, by nuclear firestorm – that gives rise to her most complex and powerful narrative, in the shape of *The Burning Book* (1983). In this novel, the inauguration of the atomic age at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 forms the late twentieth century’s originary trauma, condemning the protagonists to lives of dread and despair and suspending a looming, cosmic threat over the minutiae of everyday life. In an eerie materialization

of this trauma's lingering after-effects, the narrative's London streets throng with spectral *Hibakusha* ('explosion-affected people'), appealing desperately for recognition of their suffering. Again, words fail in the presence of such horror:

The screams seem unwritable [...] and they demand to come in. [...] [T]housands of voices are crying. They scratch the pane like birds.

Like pigeons in a lost grey square. The buildings they cling to are lifeless. [...] They scratch at a pane with no faces. But the truth is, yes, we are here. (Gee 1985, 20)

Reading the novel's non-chronological ordering of the characters' lives, it is, as Jacqueline Foertsch suggests, 'as if the bomb has disrupted the normal progression of time, the linear movement of narrative itself, which has now developed an instinct for planetary preservation by refusing to ever conclude' (Foertsch 1999, 480). When, however, the end of the novel and the end of the world do, inevitably, come, we find narrative yielding – equally inevitably, perhaps – to a series of blank (or rather, blacked-out) pages.

For another – especially celebrated – cluster of British novelists, who were born during or shortly after the Second World War and rose to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s, trauma, whether seeping out of the past or homing in from future, stands, as it does for Gee, as the defining condition of our age. Four writers, in particular, stand out: Pat Barker, Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, and Martin Amis. Barker remains best known for her *Regeneration* trilogy (*Regeneration* [1991], *The Eye in the Door* [1993], and *The Ghost Road* [1995]), a prolonged study of the relationships between the real-life psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers and a group of (variously historical and fictional) British officers referred to him with shell shock during the First World War. The trilogy dramatizes the unconventional, psychoanalytically-informed techniques that Rivers employed in caring for his patients, who included the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, and explores the morality of treating traumatised soldiers only for them to be returned to the front. In the first instalment of the series, trauma is shown to be, quite literally, unspeakable, as the central character, the fictional Billy Prior, is rendered mute after witnessing a particularly gruesome scene of carnage in the trenches:

He ran his tongue along the edges of his teeth, [...] flexed his lips, felt the pull of the skin and the stretching muscles in his throat. All present and correct, but how they combined together to make sounds he had no idea. [...] He [...] tried to think over the events [...] but found that he could remember very little about them. Two of his men were dead, he remembered that. Nothing else. Like the speechlessness, it seemed natural. (Barker 1996, 93-94)

For all the *Regeneration* trilogy's power and popularity, however, perhaps Barker's exemplary novel is the comparatively neglected *Another World*, since it explicitly articulates the ways in which the historical traumas of the past continue to haunt the present. Focusing on the attempt of a middle-aged psychology professor, Nick, to understand the shattering experiences of his grandfather, Geordie, in the Great War, the novel places particular emphasis on the indelibility and intractability of trauma, its quasi-material resistance to symbolic or imaginative remoulding. Nick observes, for example, that 'Geordie's memories aren't malleable [...] On the contrary, Geordie's tragedy is that his memories are carved in granite' (Barker 1999,

86-87). Elsewhere, reflecting on Geordie's belief that it is his long-since-healed bayonet wound, rather than his advancing cancer, which is killing him, Nick notes that the 'bayonet wound's the physical equivalent of the eruption of memory that makes his nights dreadful' (227). Similarly, recognising that Geordie's primary, but rarely voiced, preoccupation is the death of his brother in No Man's Land, Nick imagines this loss as the 'dark star' around which '[a]ll Geordie's words orbit' (158). This idea – that traumatic memories are absolutely and irreducibly *real*, as real as the material ruptures that produce them – has, as we will see shortly, proven especially compelling in contemporary culture.

Barker's repetitive revisiting of the First World War (from which her own grandfather returned wounded and uncommunicative) could itself be described as compulsive, the war having featured prominently in, at the last count, seven of her twelve novels: *Another World* and the three volumes of the *Regeneration* trilogy, as well as *The Century's Daughter* (1986), *Life Class* (2007), and *Toby's Room* (2012). Much the same could be said of Ian McEwan with respect to World War II: the conflict is the subject of the television play *The Imitation Game* (1981) and the novels *Black Dogs* (1992) and *Atonement* (2001), and also forms a powerful background presence in his libretto for the oratorio *Or Shall We Die?* (1983) (about nuclear weapons) and a further novel, *The Innocent* (1990) (set in a gloomy 1950s Berlin). *Atonement* is certainly McEwan's most significant treatment of the traumatic impact of the war, both on his parents' generation (his father was wounded whilst with the British Expeditionary Force in France) and his own (growing up, he sometimes 'found it hard to believe [he] had not been alive in the summer of 1940' [McEwan 1981, 17]). The exceptionally vivid middle section of the novel epitomises McEwan's status as, in James Wood's words, 'the great contemporary stager of traumatic contingency as it strikes ordinary lives' (2009). Cast by chance into the army when wartime service secures him an early release from the prison in which he has languished for a rape he did not commit, the protagonist, Robbie, finds himself in this section of the novel caught up in the British Expeditionary Force's chaotic retreat to Dunkirk. The narrative conveys a powerfully evocative impression of the soldiers' traumatised condition – hungry, exhausted, and harried by the merciless German dive-bombers:

They were too dazed, they were in shock from repeated episodes of terror. Each dive brought every man, cornered and cowering, to face his execution. When it did not come, the trial had to be lived through all over again and the fear did not diminish. For the living, the end of a Stuka attack was the paralysis of shock, of repeated shocks. (McEwan 2001, 238-39)

Not only does *Atonement* describe traumatic states with a rare immediacy, however; it also stages an experience of shock, pain, loss, and compulsive repetition for the reader, the famously heart-breaking twist withheld until the closing pages inevitably sending the reader back through the novel in search of some clue that might have allowed him or her to meet this emotional blow forewarned (see Crosthwaite 2009, 168-74). Trauma (and the trauma of war in particular) is both McEwan's major theme and the primary narrative effect his writing strives to elicit.

To an even greater extent than Barker and McEwan, perhaps, Graham Swift possesses a fictional imagination circumscribed by the horror and agony of war, whether the focus is his 'great history lesson' (qtd. in O'Mahoney 2003), the Second World War (as in *Shuttlecock* [1981], *Last Orders* [1996], and, to some degree,

almost all of his other fiction), the Falklands War (*Out of this World* [1988]), the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s (*The Light of Day* [2003]), or the second Iraq War (*Wish You Were Here* [2011]). Swift's most extended meditation on twentieth-century warfare, and his finest work, is *Waterland* (1983). Largely made up of a teacher, Tom Crick's, classroom recollections of his adolescent experiences in the East Anglian fens in the summer of 1943, merging into eccentric disquisitions on violence, progress, revolution, and the nature of history, *Waterland's* narrative ranges over the trenches of Flanders, the ruins of Hamburg and Düsseldorf, the streets of Belfast and Derry, the squares and embassies of Tehran, and the mountains of Afghanistan. As in Pat Barker's fiction, the traumas of the past relentlessly ooze into the present. In Crick's words, 'Who will not know the mud of Flanders? Who will not feel in this twentieth century of ours [...] the mud of Flanders sucking at his feet?' (Swift 1999, 19). A group of shell-shocked veterans of those hellish 'mudscapes' (20), patients at a remote home for 'neurasthenics', exist in the text as living confirmations that 'evil lingers and [...] things of the past aren't things of the past. For though the great war ended, the broken-minded soldiers still came and remained. For them, life had stopped, though they must go on living' (227-28). The 'vision of the world in ruins' (240) that Crick glimpses whilst stationed in Germany on military service in the aftermath of World War II will overshadow his own life, and fuel his pessimistic belief that 'every so often history demands a bloodbath, a holocaust, an Armageddon' (141). In the novel's present day (1979 or 1980), history's insatiable appetite for catastrophe seems once again to be approaching a pitch, as the ominous prospect of nuclear war becomes ever more palpable. While Crick is scarred by the past, his pupils, like the protagonists of Gee's *Burning Book*, are weirdly, eerily traumatised by the future, their dreams haunted by warning sirens, fallout shelters, vaporised buildings, and radiation-scorched children (296-97).

A similar sensitivity to a cataclysm that remains perpetually impending, but is at the same time somehow already here, already permeating mind and body, is found in key works by Martin Amis. Amis first meditated on this theme in *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), a collection of five short stories devoted to the prospect of nuclear war. In the essay, 'Thinkability', which introduces the collection, he writes:

What we are experiencing, in as much as it can be experienced, is the experience of nuclear war. Because the anticipation [...] the anxiety, the suspense, is the only experience of nuclear war that anyone is going to get. [...] What are the psychological effects of nuclear weapons? As yet undetonated, the world's arsenals are already waging psychological warfare [...] The airbursts, the preemptive strikes, the massive retaliations, the uncontrollable escalations: it is already happening inside our heads. (Amis 1990a, 22)

Amis' most powerful fictional evocation of this condition appears in *London Fields* (1989). Set in 1999, the novel's oppressively premillennial atmosphere is generated by the coalescence of factors variously geopolitical, ecological, and astronomical into an omnipresent state of planetary emergency referred to simply as 'the Crisis' or 'the Situation'. One of the ways in which 'the Crisis' seems likely to reach 'the Conclusion' it 'appears to crave' (Amis 1990b, 64) is via a massive nuclear strike, as envisioned by one of the central characters:

[T]he first event would be light-speed. A world become white like a pale sun. [...] Everything that faced the window would turn to fire: the checked curtains, this newspaper [...] The next event would come rather faster than the speed of sound, faster than the noise, the strident thunder, the heavensplitting vociferation of fission. This would be the blast over-pressure. [...] The house, in effect, would become a bomb, and all its plaster and order, its glass and steel would be shrapnel, buckshot. (276)

Even as such a fate remains suspended, however, we see that it is already achieving its insidious effects, dissolving the ethical bonds required to maintain the integrity of the social order: 'What if you survived into a world where nothing mattered, where everything was permitted? [...] [I]f, at any moment, nothing might matter, then who said that nothing didn't matter already?' (254).

The ethical crises sparked by mass atrocity also preoccupy Amis in *Time's Arrow* (1991), a daring narrative experiment in which the life of a Nazi doctor is told in reverse, so that the patients who visit him at his practice in the United States after the war leave the surgery sicker than when they arrived, while the Jews who encounter him at Auschwitz are miraculously resurrected. In this back-to-front world, the Nazi genocide assumes a 'preternatural purpose': 'To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire' (Amis 1991, 128). The controversy provoked by the book (reminiscent of the furore surrounding Thomas' *The White Hotel*) saw Amis accused of cynicism, gimmickry, and even anti-Semitism. Yet for all its incongruous stylistic playfulness, *Time's Arrow* is organised around a serious ethical proposition: that the ultimate demonstration of the insanity of the Holocaust lies in the fact that the very physical laws of the universe would need to be reversed in order for the genocide 'to start making sense' (124). In addition to what many saw as the distasteful showiness of Amis' virtuoso performance in *Time's Arrow*, a further aspect of the novel that troubled some critics was the way in which the narrative's intimate portrayal of a Nazi war criminal risked humanising this heinous figure and establishing a problematic state of empathy or complicity between him and the reader. Such anxieties would return to the forefront of critical debates fifteen years later with the widely-heralded publication of the French-American writer Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2009 [2006]), a novel narrated through the eyes of the urbane, philosophical leader of an SS execution squad.

For two British-based authors of German ancestry who emerged as important voices around the turn of the twenty-first century – W.G. Sebald and Rachel Seiffert – complicity, shared responsibility, and guilt by association were inescapable realities that demanded to be explored in fiction. Born in Bavaria in 1944, Sebald moved to Britain in the mid-1960s and held posts in German at the University of East Anglia from 1970 until his death in a car accident in 2001. Known for many years solely as a critic of German and Austrian literature, it was only from the late 1980s that Sebald, like George Steiner, began to combine academic scholarship with imaginative writing that probed the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust. As he remarked, 'If you know in the generation before you that your parents, your uncles and aunts were tacit accomplices, it's difficult to say you haven't anything to do with it. I've always felt I had to know what happened in detail, and to try to understand why it should have been so' (qtd. in Jaggi 2001). This quest for understanding is evident across the four idiosyncratic blends of novel, memoir, treatise, and travelogue that Sebald (writing for initial publication in German) completed before his untimely death: *Vertigo* (1999

[1990]), *The Emigrants* (1996 [1992]), *The Rings of Saturn* (1999 [1995]), and *Austerlitz* (2001). In *Austerlitz*, the work that sealed his posthumous reputation, Sebald's sense of ethical responsibility to his Holocaust survivor protagonist, Jacques Austerlitz, is manifest in the narrative structure itself: the mediation of Austerlitz's recollections via a diffident, retiring unnamed narrator (a version, as in other texts, of Sebald himself) cuts a middle course between spurious, first-person identification with the survivor and the imposition of an objectifying, omniscient narrative gaze. The story Austerlitz tells the narrator over a succession of accidental meetings spanning some thirty years is a story of irreparable (and, for decades, unconscious) trauma, of the wrenching separation brought about by the *Kindertransport*, as it uprooted Jewish children from Central Europe and deposited them in England, and of the impossibility of reconstructing the vanished worlds of Jewish Prague, Vienna, or Berlin. In the narrative's pivotal moment, an instance of that psychic mechanism Freud termed *Nachträglichkeit* ('afterwardsness', 'belatedness') – the spontaneous reawakening of a long-repressed traumatic memory – Austerlitz finds himself in a secluded corner of Liverpool Street Station (a place that has always pulled him towards 'the vortex of past time' [Sebald 2002, 182]) and finally becomes cognisant of his arrival there as a child:

I felt [...] that the waiting-room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my past life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I had ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern of the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the endgame would be played, and it covered the entire plane of time. (193)

In its mapping of this 'plane of time', the novel accords particular significance to photography. Austerlitz, a keen photographer in his youth, describes being 'entranced' by 'the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night' (109). Yet the eerie, enigmatic photographs interspersed, in Sebald's signature manner, throughout the text prove to be exactly that – mere 'shadows' of a reality that remains mysterious. Photographs, like traumatic memories, Sebald suggests, seem to guarantee some direct connection to the truth of historical events; but, by the same token, they are fragmentary, decontextualised, and ultimately indecipherable.

The capacity of photography both to reveal and obscure the traumas of the past, and the lingering taint of familial or national complicity in those traumas, are also preoccupations for Rachel Seiffert, a child of German and Australian parents raised in Oxford and Glasgow. Seiffert's debut, *The Dark Room* (2001), three novellas addressing the German experience of World War II and its aftermath, instantly established her profile amongst the front rank of young British writers. Moving from a young photographer documenting the brutalities of the Third Reich from behind the protective barrier of his camera lens, to the children of a Nazi Party member traversing the chaotic landscape of post-war Germany, to a middle-aged man seeking the truth of his grandfather's shameful activities in the Waffen-SS, *The Dark Room* concerns itself with 'the real, everyday people', 'the underlings' (Seiffert 2002, 290), who made Nazi tyranny possible. Again, photographs seem to offer some privileged means of access to the numberless, everyday atrocities perpetrated under the Reich, and yet at the same time to capture events in weirdly fragmentary, unreadable ways – as when the protagonist of the first novella, Helmut, records a Gestapo assault on a group of gypsies:

Helmut [...] sees that the photos are unclear. [...] That they convey none of the chaos and cruelty which had his hands shaking and sweating, and which had spurred him to fill almost two rolls [...] The woman who was knocked unconscious hardly looks like she is running on [*sic*] Helmut's photo of her attempt to escape [...] He thinks he must have been reloading while she was being dragged back to the truck and the shot of her being bundled inside is so badly out of focus as to be indecipherable. (39-41)

As Petra Rau notes, it is Seiffert's strategy throughout *The Dark Room* to present us with 'key encounters between her protagonists, historical reality, and its representation in photography in order to assess photography's potential to calibrate trauma and affect memory' (Rau 2006, 297).

Writers on the theme of trauma who emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, such as Sebald and Seiffert, extended concerns that had long preoccupied the likes of Steiner, Thomas, Barker, McEwan, Swift, and Amis; at the same time, the period witnessed a convergence of these novelistic tendencies with a developing paradigm in literary and cultural criticism known as 'trauma theory' or 'trauma studies'. These intersecting fictional and critical developments were themselves part of a wider 'trauma culture' (Kaplan 2005) that captured the *zeitgeist* in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere around the turn of the twenty-first century. As the American art historian Hal Foster observed in a book published in 1996, '[a]cross artistic, theoretical, and popular cultures (in SoHo, at Yale, on *Oprah*) there is a tendency to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma' (Foster 1996, 168). As Foster implied, 'trauma theory' was both a manifestation of this broad cultural tendency and an attempt to expressly formulate its agenda.

For major trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth (1996), Shoshana Felman (2002), Dominick LaCapra (2001), Michael Rothberg (2000), Anne Whitehead (2004), and Foster himself, the primary lure of trauma as a psychological phenomenon was the demand it issued to rethink the assumptions of postmodern thought and aesthetics in the names of history, referentiality, subjectivity, materiality, and the real. If, within a postmodern mindset that took its cues from thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, history consisted of so many depthless simulacra, subjectivity amounted to an interchangeable array of guises and performances, and 'reality' (always in quotation marks) was inaccessible, exhausted, or a mere product of discourse, then the category of trauma suggested a paradigm in which, on the contrary, the past remained a powerful living force in the present, identity was anchored in singular, irreducibly authentic experience, and it was not reality's absence that rendered it unrepresentable, but rather its overwhelming presence (see Crosthwaite 2009, ch. 1). Trauma, then, offered critics a means of regrounding the cultural artefacts they studied in the material realities of history. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, texts by the likes of Steiner, Thomas, Ballard, Barker, McEwan, and Sebald have often been identified by trauma theorists as corroborating the movement's claims. The prominence of trauma in fiction, in literary criticism and theory, and in the wider culture meant that by the end of the century traumatic experience had become virtually synonymous with historical experience as such (see Luckhurst 2008). It was thus inevitable that after the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001 narrative responses to '9/11' and the 'war on terror' would be consistently framed in terms of trauma.

In the US, the September 11 attacks were filtered through the discourse of trauma in works by major writers like Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jay McInerney, Claire Messud, Joyce Carol Oates, and Art Spiegelman. Given his longstanding concern with the traumatic states engendered by acts of atrocity, it was logical enough that, amongst British authors, Martin Amis would emerge as an especially vocal commentator on 9/11 and its aftermath. The bulk of this commentary, collected in *The Second Plane* (2008), took the form of articles and essays, whose scathing critiques of ‘the Islamic World’ (‘No doubt the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male’ runs one piece [Amis 2009, 87]) drew accusations of Islamophobia (see Bradley and Tate 2010, ch. 2). *The Second Plane* also featured two short stories: ‘In the Palace of the End’ (2004), the mordant confessions of a body double for a Saddam-esque dictator’s son, and ‘The Last Days of Muhammad Atta’ (2006), an imagined account of the hours leading up to the World Trade Centre attacks from the point of view of the infamous lead hijacker. The most notable element of Atta’s characterisation in the latter story is the ‘core reason’ assigned to him for carrying out the attacks: not religion or politics, but simply ‘all the killing – all the putting to death’ (Amis 2009, 118). In Atta’s nihilistic imagination – given over to the lure of Thanatos, the siren song of the death drive – the attraction of this act of terrorism is that it will unleash a tidal wave of violence and trauma across the globe:

He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war-cycles that would flow from this day. [...] Death, at certain times, stopped moving at its even pace and broke into a hungry, lumbering run. Here was the primordial secret. No longer closely guarded – no longer well kept. Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made – the massive contribution to death. (119)

Another writer who took the risky move of narrating the events of 9/11 from the perspective of a character antagonistic to Western power was Mohsin Hamid. Born in Lahore, educated at Princeton and Harvard, and resident in London, Hamid, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), reflects on the ways in which the September 11 attacks assume different meanings when viewed from different geographical and ideological vantage points. Told in dramatic monologue, the novel consists of the protagonist, Changez’s, narration of his experiences in the United States before and after 9/11 to an American visitor to Lahore, who may or may not have more clandestine business in the city than he admits. Changez tells of his rapid ascent from Princeton to a leading New York financial firm, the suggestively initialled Underwood Samson, and then of his growing disillusionment with the United States’ actions around the world, which eventually leads him to return to Pakistan as a radical activist and – perhaps – terrorist. His movement towards anti-Western radicalism takes a decisive step after the collapse of the twin towers, when he feels pleasure at the ‘symbolism’ of America being ‘brought [...] to her knees’ (Hamid 2007, 73) and alienation in a city that now views him as an outsider and potential enemy.

In *Saturday* (2005), published just a few months before the London bombings of 7 July 2005, Ian McEwan characterises Islamist terrorists – ‘growing, and angry, and thirsty for another mass killing’ – as the inheritors of the ‘totalitarian’ legacy of ‘Hitler, Stalin, Mao’ (McEwan 2005b, 276, 275). Over the course of the single day on which the novel is set – Saturday 15 February 2003, the day of the massive anti-Iraq War protest in London – the novel’s protagonist, a neurosurgeon named Henry

Perowne, is periodically conscious of the existence of ‘people around the planet, well-connected and organised, who would like to kill him and his family and friends to make a point’ (81). Perowne is convinced that there will ‘be more deaths [...] probably in this city’ (81), and the realisation of this pessimistic prediction mere months after the book’s appearance lent *Saturday* a grimly prophetic air that is unlikely ever to dissipate. In the narrative itself, however, the threat of terrorism is displaced onto the capital’s criminal underclass in the figure of Baxter, an edgy, aggressive young man whose tics Perowne’s expert eye recognises as symptoms of the onset of Huntington’s disease. Perowne’s first encounter with Baxter, when their cars collide, is one of those traumatic moments in which McEwan specialises, Baxter’s vehicle ‘a flash of red’ that ‘streaks in across [Perowne’s] peripheral vision’, ‘an idea, a new idea, unexpected and dangerous’ (81). Later, after Baxter and his cronies have invaded Perowne’s heavily secured home and almost raped his pregnant daughter, Perowne reflects on the way in which, on city streets fully as much as desert battlefields, ‘consequences of an action leap away from your control and breed new events, new consequences, until you’re led to a place you never dreamed of and would never choose – a knife at the throat’ (277).

Another London-set response to the post-9/11 ‘age of terror’, Chris Cleave’s *Incendiary* (2005), an account of the devastating effects of a suicide bombing in the city, appeared even more eerily prescient than *Saturday* when it was published on the very day four young British Muslims detonated homemade explosives on the capital’s public transport system. The fictional bombing, an Al-Qaeda attack on Arsenal FC’s Emirates Stadium, claims the lives of more than a thousand spectators, including the husband and son of the unnamed narrator, a nervy working-class woman from the East End. In a singular take on the epistolary novel form, the narrative consists of letters addressed to Osama Bin Laden. These missives describe the bombing and, via the narrator’s unpolished but expressive style, capture her resulting ‘post-traumatic shock’ (Cleave 2009, 282). The narrator’s trauma is evoked especially powerfully when she writes:

Before you bombed my boy Osama I always thought an explosion was such a quick thing but now I know better. The flash is over very fast but the fire catches hold inside you and the noise never stops. You can press your hands on your ears but you can never block it out. The fire keeps on roaring with incredible noise and fury. And the strangest thing is people can be sitting right next to you on the Central Line and not hear a sound. I live in an inferno where you could shiver with cold Osama. This life is a deafening roar but listen. You could hear a pin drop. (235-36)

Rather like Muhammad Atta in Amis’ short story, Cleave’s narrator imagines terrorist attacks as mere facets of a wave of violence surging triumphantly across the globe:

Your twin towers attack or just 2 blokes arguing over a cab fare it’s all the same. All the violence in the world is connected it’s just like the sea. When I see a woman shouting at her kid in Asda car park I see bulldozers flattening refugee camps. I see those little African boys with scars across the tops of their skulls like headphones. I see all the lost tempers of the world I see HELL ON EARTH. (13)

A similar impression of the universality of conflict and aggression is conveyed in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), which sombrely informs the reader that '[o]nly twenty-nine years in the entire human history [have] been without warfare' (Aslam 2009, 270). Aslam, who was born and brought up in Pakistan but has lived in England since his teens, sets his novel in the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan in the period following the US and British invasion of 2001. This area of the globe, the novel suggests, has functioned over successive decades as the ravaged focal point of the wider world's hostilities, from the bitter struggle between the Soviet Union and the Mujahideen (and their American backers) in the 1980s, through the brutalities of the radical Islamist Taliban regime in the 1990s, to the post-invasion chaos of the 2000s. Aslam's characters are all scarred, physically and psychologically, by this perpetual state of conflict, none more so than the protagonist, Marcus Caldwell, an English Muslim convert. Marcus' daughter disappeared during the Soviet-Afghan War; his wife was executed and he had his own hand amputated under the Taliban; and, in the novel's present day, he is caught in the blast of a suicide bombing. The description of the explosion is another powerful testament to the overwhelming force and intensity of traumatic experience:

He hears nothing and then slowly, as he gets to his feet in the midst of this war of the end of the world, scream soldered onto scream. He thinks the silence was the result of momentary deafness but the survivors had in all probability needed time to comprehend fully what had just taken place. The souls will need longer still, he knows, and they may not begin their howls for months and years. (74)

This passage not only captures the complex temporality of trauma; it also serves to allegorise the condition of fiction itself in the face of the catastrophic events of recent history. Whether in response to the Second World War, September 11, or the war in Afghanistan, there has invariably been a time lag, as writers have struggled to make sense of what has occurred, or, finding no sense, committed to the page narratives that read like prolonged screams of grief and despair. The prevalence of narratives of trauma in contemporary fiction no doubt testifies to the deep resonances between traumatic experience and the very writing in which it is depicted – writing that, encountering profound challenges to its own structures, to norms of language, meaning, and representation, must work through, or otherwise act out, the traumas with which history has confronted it.

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